

The Limits of Master Narratives in History Textbooks: An Analysis of Representations of Martin Luther King, Jr.

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In this study, I argue that American history textbooks present discrete, heroic, one-dimensional, and neatly packaged master narratives that deny students a complex, realistic, and rich understanding of people and events in American history. In making this argument, I examine the master narratives of Martin Luther King, Jr., in high school history textbooks and show how textbooks present prescribed, oversimplified, and uncontroversial narratives of King that obscure important elements in King's life and thought. Such master narratives, I contend, permeate most history textbooks and deny students critical lenses through which to examine, analyze, and interpret social issues today. The article concludes with suggestions about how teachers might begin to address the current problem of master narratives and offer alternative approaches to presenting U.S. history.

During my years as a high school history teacher in the early 1990s, I observed the extent to which history textbooks often presented simplistic, one-dimensional interpretations of American history within a heroic and celebratory master narrative.¹ The ideas and representations in textbooks presented a teleological progression from “great men” to “great events,” usually focusing on an idealistic evolution toward American democracy. Reflecting on these years, I also remember how heavily teachers relied on these textbooks, consequently denying students an accurate picture of the complexity and richness of American history.

U.S. history courses and curricula are dominated by such heroic and celebratory master narratives as those portraying George Washington and Thomas Jefferson as the heroic “Founding Fathers,” Abraham Lincoln as the “Great Emancipator,” and Martin Luther King, Jr., as the messianic savior of African Americans. Often these figures are portrayed in isolation from other individuals and events in their historical context. At the same time, the more controversial aspects of their lives and beliefs are left out of many history textbooks. The result is that students often are exposed to

simplistic, one-dimensional, and truncated portraits that deny them a realistic and multifaceted picture of American history. In this way, such texts and curricula undermine a key purpose of learning history in the first place: History should provide students with an understanding of the complexities, contradictions, and nuances in American history, and knowledge of its triumphs and strengths.²

In his highly regarded book, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, James Loewen argued that “Textbooks are often muddled by the conflicting desires to promote inquiry and to indoctrinate blind patriotism” and that history is usually presented as “facts to be learned,” free of controversy and contradictions between American ideals and practice. According to Loewen, the simplistic and doctrinaire content in most history textbooks contributes to student boredom and fails to challenge students to think about the relationship of history to contemporary social affairs and life.³

Loewen’s argument is not new. In 1935, historian W. E. B. Du Bois also noted the tendency of textbooks to promote certain master narratives while leaving out differing or controversial information about historical figures and events. As an example, Du Bois noted,

One is astonished in the study of history at the recurrence of the idea that evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over. We must not remember that Daniel Webster got drunk but only remember that he was a splendid constitutional lawyer. We must forget that George Washington was a slave owner, or that Thomas Jefferson had mulatto children, or that Alexander Hamilton had Negro blood, and simply remember the things we regard as creditable and inspiring. The difficulty, of course, with this philosophy is that history loses its value as an incentive and example; it paints perfect men and noble nations, but it does not tell the truth.⁴

The dominance of master narratives in textbooks denies students a complicated, complex, and nuanced portrait of American history. As a result, students often receive information that is inaccurate, simplistic, and disconnected from the realities of contemporary local, national, and world affairs. When master narratives dominate history textbooks, students find history boring, predictable, or irrelevant. If we continue on this course of presenting history to students, we risk producing a generation that does not understand its history or the connection of that history to the contemporary world. We also deny students access to relevant, dynamic, and often controversial history or critical lenses that would provide them insight into the dilemmas, challenges, and realities of living in a democratic society such as the United States.

In this article, I examine how textbooks present heroic, uncritical, and celebratory master narratives of history. In doing so, I illustrate the master narratives that history textbooks present of one of America's most heroic icons, Martin Luther King, Jr. I illuminate how high school history textbooks promote King through three master narratives: King as a messiah, King as the embodiment of the civil rights movement, and King as a moderate. Having shown how textbook master narratives portray King, I conclude by suggesting how teachers might move beyond the limitations of these narratives to offer students a more complex, accurate, and realistic view of figures and events in American history.⁵

METHODOLOGY AND TEXTBOOK SELECTION

Literary analysis, a primary method in intellectual history, is the main methodological approach used for this study. According to historian Richard Beringer, literary analysis "involves reading source material and drawing evidence from that material to be used in supporting a point of view or thesis."⁶ In most cases, such source material includes poetry, novels, or short stories, but it may also include nonfictional material. Beringer presents a straightforward approach to conducting literary analysis: (1) read the literature, (2) note the themes, (3) discuss the themes, and (4) support your conclusion by example. In this study, high school history textbooks serve as the source material. The focal point of this investigation is the representation of Martin Luther King, Jr., in the textbooks. King was chosen as a subject of analysis because he is a widely recognized figure in American history whose image has come to epitomize ideals of democracy, equality, and freedom in America.

To explore how contemporary textbooks represent King, I examine six popular and widely adopted American history textbooks: *The American Pageant* (2002) by Thomas A. Bailey, David M. Kennedy, and Lizabeth Cohen; *American Odyssey: The United States in the 20th Century* (2004) by Gary B. Nash; *America: Pathways to the Present* (2005) by Andrew Cayton, Linda Reed, Elisabeth Perry, and Allan M. Winkler; *The Americans* (2005) by Gerald A. Danzer et al.; *The American Nation: A History of the United States* (2003) by John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes; and *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society* (2004) by Gary B. Nash, Julie Jeffrey, et al.⁷

According to the American Textbook Council, *America: Pathways to the Present*, *American Odyssey*, and *The Americans* are widely used in American high schools. Other textbook studies cite *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society* as a popular textbook. I chose *The American Nation* because of its focus on political history and because it is a "bestseller" for Allyn & Bacon. *The American Pageant* has long been a popular textbook for

high-level and advanced placement students in high school.⁸ In addition, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation cited *The American Nation*, *America: Pathways to the Present*, *American Odyssey*, and *The Americans* as four widely used textbooks in U.S. schools.⁹

Highly respected historians wrote the textbooks examined in this study, and the information in them likely represents a broad spectrum of the ideas that are being conveyed about King in American classrooms.¹⁰ Furthermore, historian Van Gosse, who has conducted studies on American history textbooks, stated that textbooks are “remarkably similar in what is and what is not included; how an incident, person, or occasion is described; and in the sequence used to establish relationships among events.”¹¹ Gosse’s assertion about the similarity of content among history textbooks supports my claim that these six textbooks may be considered representative of a much larger selection of high school history texts.

KING AS A MESSIAH

One way that textbooks package information for students is through the presentation of messianic master narratives. A messianic master narrative highlights one exceptional individual as the progenitor of a movement, a leader who rose to lead a people. The idea of messianism has long been a part of American culture and religion. Rooted in Judeo-Christian tradition and beliefs, the concept of a deliverer coming to Earth to free the masses from evil or oppression has been very appealing to Americans because of the predominance of Judeo-Christian beliefs and traditions in the United States.¹²

Perhaps more than any other figure in American history, the preacher has historically and symbolically been viewed as a messianic figure in the African American community. Historian John Blassingame traced this phenomenon to the institution of slavery, noting, “The Black preacher had special oratorical skills and was master of the vivid phrase, folk poetry, and picturesque words.”¹³ Given the resonance of preachers as messianic figures, it is understandable that Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., evoked a messianic image during his lifetime, one that the media and textbook publishers continue to promote today.¹⁴

King understood the power of symbolism and metaphor and purposefully evoked messianic imagery and symbolism in placing the struggle of African Americans within the context of biblical narratives. During his childhood in the 1930s and 1940s, young King came under the influence of his minister father, Daddy King, in Ebenezer Baptist Church, and many other great preachers throughout the South. These men influenced him with the biblical style of storytelling. The preaching that King was exposed to as a child was only one to two generations removed from the “slave

preaching” that black Americans heard during slavery, which was full of the passion and pain of a people in bondage.¹⁵ King studied and practiced the language, mannerisms, and locution of the black preachers and began to reconfigure the religious metaphors and symbols for the struggles of his generation.¹⁶

King’s use of biblical language and imagery in both the spoken and written word also promoted a messianic tone and message that was appealing to a predominantly Christian nation such as United States during the 1950s and 1960s. His merger of messianic and patriotic symbolism appealed to America’s patriotic sensibilities and its dominant Christian demography. King, like many political and religious leaders before and after him, understood the power of transcending racial ideological barriers by attempting to unify people under American and Judeo-Christian symbolism.¹⁷ His references to the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, the Emancipation Proclamation, and a “promissory note,” juxtaposed with biblical references to “trials and tribulations,” “brotherhood,” and valleys, hills, and “crooked places” helped illuminate the images of Moses and the Exodus, Abraham Lincoln, and the Founders.

Given many historians’ focus on King as the central figure in the civil rights movement, it is understandable that messianic symbolism continues to be associated with King. For example, the titles of some of the most popular books on King allude to messianic metaphor and symbolism. They include David Garrow’s *Bearing the Cross*; Stephen Oates’s *Let the Trumpet Sound*; Taylor Branch’s trilogy *Parting the Waters*, *A Pillar of Fire*, and *At Canaan’s Edge*; and Michael Dyson’s *I May Not Get There with You*.¹⁸

History textbooks today also use messianic symbolism in portraying King as a messiah or “deliverer” during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Birmingham campaign, and the March on Washington, and on the day before King was killed. For instance, four of the six textbooks portray King as an “unlikely champion” who would lead his people to the “promised land” during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The unlikely champion reference parallels Judeo-Christian stories of Moses, the unlikely deliverer who was the son of an Egyptian pharaoh, and Jesus, the unlikely deliverer who was the son of a humble carpenter. *The American Pageant*, for example, states, “barely twenty-seven years old, King seemed an unlikely champion of the downtrodden and disenfranchised.” *The American Odyssey* says of King, “short in stature and gentle in manner, King was at the time only 27 years old.” The four texts referred to above also emphasize King’s youth or his privileged background as attributes that made him an “unlikely deliverer” of the Montgomery Movement.¹⁹

Three of the six textbooks identify King’s December 5, 1955, speech at Holt Street Baptist Church as a significant event during the boycott.²⁰ The emphasis on this particular speech further reinforces the focus on King as a

messiah, because the speech is replete with symbolic messianic messages and metaphors of a young, unlikely but charismatic savior. *American Odyssey* provides the most extensive coverage of the speech, including a picture of King delivering the speech, and quotes the following passage:

There comes a time when people get tired. We are here this evening to say to those who have mistreated us so long that we are tired—tired of being segregated and humiliated, tired of being kicked about by the brutal feet of oppression . . . If you will protest courageously and yet with dignity and Christian love, in the history books that are written in future generations, historians will have to pause and say “there lived a great people—a black people—who injected a new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization.” This is our challenge and our overwhelming responsibility.²¹

King’s words reflected that of a young messiah trying to persuade his oppressed people to endure their trials and tribulations in the short term because their cause was just and because they could expect a better future. Such portrayals evoke the imagery of Jesus and Moses leading the masses and encouraging their people to endure temporary hardships for the long-term benefits of reaching paradise or the “promised land.”

Like many of King’s speeches, the Holt Street speech shows King in the messianic mission of delivering “God-inspired” words to the masses. *America: Pathways*, *The Americans*, and *The American People* also quote from this speech, reinforcing King’s strong words pertaining to Christian love and the liberation of the masses from the “brutal feet of oppression.” *The Americans* provides a block quotation from the speech and further reiterates its messianic symbolism, stating that “the impact of King’s speech—the rhythm of his words, the power of his rising and falling voice—brought people to their feet.”²² The textbooks’ focus on a “messianic King,” even during his early life, denies students an opportunity to see King as a real person and as a young man who develops into a leader over time. Students also lose the opportunity to study the community leadership in Birmingham before King and to learn about the many ordinary citizens, whom King called his “foot soldiers,” who also played significant roles in the civil rights movement.

All the textbooks that I examined also promote messianic imagery in their presentations of the Birmingham campaign and the 1963 March on Washington. For instance, most of the textbooks evoke messianic symbolism of the apostle Paul’s letters to the masses by printing, in part, King’s explanations to Christian ministers for breaking segregation laws and advocating for social justice. *American Odyssey*, for example, uses messianic symbolism by preceding King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” with the

following statement: “Representing the opposition was King, who timed the demonstrations to include his arrest on Good Friday, the Christian holy day marking the death of Jesus.”²³ Three other textbooks also provide block quotations from King’s “Birmingham Letter.” *America: Pathways* sets up its section about the Birmingham Letter and campaign by discussing King’s answer to a reporter who questioned him about how long he would stay in Birmingham. *America: Pathways* states that King “drew on a biblical story and told them he would remain until ‘Pharaoh lets God’s people go.’”²⁴

While *The American Pageant* and *The American People* both discuss the Birmingham campaign, neither mentions King’s letter. However, they more than compensate for their minimal messianic symbolism of King in Birmingham with their overly messianic portrayals of King at the March on Washington. *The American Pageant* and *The American People* further illuminate this imagery by providing a color picture of King waving before the multitude of people. The textbook images of King are reminiscent of Hollywood portrayals of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus is often portrayed with outstretched arms before a multitude of his followers.²⁵

America: Pathways quotes extensively from the “I Have a Dream” speech and provides messianic symbolism by featuring a photo of a long processional of marchers, also symbolic of the crowds that gathered to hear Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. *American Odyssey*, *The Americans*, and *The American Nation* discuss and highlight the March on Washington to a lesser extent but still evoke similar examples of symbolism and imagery. However, *The American Nation* largely resists the more flowery or symbolic messianic language of the other texts.

Most of the textbooks address the last two major campaigns of King’s life—the march to Selma and his final days in Memphis. In all cases, the authors continue a type of messianic passion play, concluding with King’s famous “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech. The Selma campaign was the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s (SCLC) march from Selma, Alabama, to Montgomery to further heighten the national intensity of the movement and to help push the Voting Rights Act of 1965 through Congress. *American Odyssey* provides a half-page black-and-white photo of a long processional of people marching from over the horizon, approaching from the Edmund Pettus Bridge outside of Selma on the way to the state capital of Montgomery, Alabama.²⁶ This may easily be seen as symbolic of Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea.

All the texts that mention the Selma march deliver an Exodus-type narrative in which King’s last “plague,” the march, eventually forced a “Pharonic” President Johnson to push for the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Moreover, the authors of *America: Pathways* believed that Johnson’s use of the language and symbolism of the civil rights movement was so important that they quoted a passage from a speech given by the president

shortly after the Selma march. *America: Pathways* quotes Johnson's use of the civil rights anthem: "And . . . we . . . shall . . . overcome."²⁷ Like the biblical pharaoh who eventually acknowledged the Hebrew God in the Exodus, *The Americans'* portrayal of Johnson's co-option of "We shall overcome" conjures up the messianic story of Moses in the Exodus and parallels Pharaoh Rameses's acknowledgement of the power of Moses' God—in this case, the momentum and energy of the civil rights movement.

Another symbolic messianic moment that four of the six textbooks present is King's legendary "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech, delivered on April 3, 1968, the night before his assassination. *The Americans*, *America: Pathways*, *The American People*, and *American Odyssey* provide quotations from this final speech, delivered while King was in Memphis helping striking garbage workers. *The Americans* also alludes to the night before King's death as a kind of Gethsemane²⁸ for King. It states that "Dr. King seemed to sense that death was near,"²⁹ while *American Odyssey* reports,

The night before his death King spoke at a church rally. He might have had a premonition when he said, "We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop . . . I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight . . . that we as a people will get to the promised land!"³⁰

The messianic master narratives of King in textbooks make him seem like a superhuman figure who made few (if any) mistakes and who was beloved by his Christian brethren. Textbooks largely fail to present King as experiencing any personal weaknesses, struggles, or shortcomings, nor do they convey the tensions that he encountered among other civil rights leaders and some Christian organizations. A more humanizing portrayal of King and the events surrounding him would address these issues and help us move beyond his larger-than-life image. Taking King out of the messianic master narrative and presenting him within the context of his full humanity provides a much more accurate, historically contextualized image of the man and what he stood for.

A critical presentation of King would provide insight into the life of an ordinary man who, along with others, challenged extraordinary forces and institutions to gain full citizenship rights for all. Such a strategy presents a more complex, genuine, and interesting knowledge base that would likely excite students about history. It might also make history "real" to students in a way that will help them see themselves as ordinary citizens who could bring about positive and progressive social change in American society.

KING AS THE EMBODIMENT OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

A second master narrative prevalent in the textbooks is King as the embodiment of the civil rights movement. This type of master narrative allows textbook writers and publishers to condense a large body of information within the life of an individual, event, or series of events. Historians often portray social movements and events in a “top-down” or “Whiggish” manner that promotes a “great man” or “great event” narrative of progress.³¹ Herbert Butterfield characterized Whiggish history as the “tendency in many historians . . . to emphasize certain principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present.”³² While the term is British, one need only think about the narratives of American history to see that the United States has its own history of Whiggism.

For example, Christopher Columbus is portrayed as “discovering” the Americas despite the evidence that others likely came before him, and more important, that the Arawaks and other Native Americans did not view themselves as having been discovered.³³ We are equally familiar with the history of the “Founding Fathers,” such as Jefferson, Washington, Madison, Hamilton, Franklin, and others as symbols of American democracy, and Abraham Lincoln as the “Great Emancipator” and symbol of freedom. However, we are rarely exposed to stories of countless other men and women whose actions were also instrumental in bringing about democracy and freedom in the United States. While efforts have been made in the field of social history to tell the stories of the common folk, narratives of “great” men and events pushing America toward an ideal of progress and civilization continue to constitute the standard way in which many historians and history textbooks disseminate information.

In telling the story of the civil rights movement, many scholars and the media have used the Whiggish approach, with King as the primary architect of and spokesman for the movement. Even during King’s lifetime, the media focused primarily on King and his agenda when covering the movement. This overwhelming focus on King has had a lasting effect on the present-day tendency to view King as the sole impetus for and sustainer of the movement. In fact, many historians periodize the movement beginning with *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and Rosa Parks and the emergence of King as a leader in 1955, and ending with King’s assassination in 1968. All the textbooks examined use the 1954/1955–1968 time period—or what some call the “King years”—to frame their discussions of the civil rights movement.

Historian Peniel Joseph argued that the emphasis on King and this “heroic” period of the movement silences many other voices before, during, and after 1954/1955–1968. As a result, the more radical or militant voices of

the civil rights movement, such as the Black Panthers, North Carolina militant Robert Franklin Williams, Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), and others are muffled or silenced.³⁴ The popular media and high school history texts provide a master narrative portraying a linear progression in which King helped move the country toward a “colorblind” society, despite some bumps in the road.

The American Pageant first brings up King as a major figure in discussing desegregation in the South during the Eisenhower years. The master narrative begins here as the text describes King and his wife, Coretta, having to spend their wedding night in a black-owned funeral parlor because of segregation laws. The text then covers key moments of the movement, such as the murder of Emmett Till, *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the Little Rock Crisis. The emergence of King as a leader in 1955 is considered a pivotal event. While *The American Pageant* acknowledges that after King’s assassination “the job was far from completed,” the book implies that the civil rights movement was over by shifting away from civil rights to a focus on Vietnam, and ending the chapter in the year 1968.³⁵

America: Pathways follows a similar format, setting the stage for the movement by discussing Jackie Robinson’s integration of major league baseball, *Brown v. Board*, Little Rock, and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. *America: Pathways* presents King “as the Movement” and introduces the movement with a picture of what appears to be the Montgomery Bus Boycott.³⁶ While *America: Pathways* pays some homage to a variety of civil rights organizations and activists such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), James Baldwin, Fannie Lou Hamer, Malcolm X, and the Black Panthers, King remains at the center of its discussion. *America: Pathways* portrays King’s image and cites his speeches and writings far more than any other person or organization involved in the movement.

The Americans gives some coverage to often overlooked activists such as E. D. Nixon, but the text is dominated by images of King and references to and quotations from his speeches. The chapter on the civil rights movement ends with the death of King in 1968, in a section titled “Legacy of the Civil Rights Movement.” Such a title implies that the civil rights movement was over after King’s death and that it was time to assess the movement.³⁷

The American Nation focuses less on King and covers the civil rights movement under the broadly formatted chapter titled “From Camelot to Watergate.” Thus, this text differs from the others by placing King in a larger context and by subsuming King and the civil rights movement within the extensive coverage of the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations. The book does situate King during his later years, 1965–1968, within the context of the Vietnam War, but without much discussion of King’s participation in the antiwar movement.³⁸

The periodization of the movement in the popular media and in textbooks to correspond with the years of King's leadership has contributed to a linear and shallow framework from which students learn little about the true breadth and depth of the movement. As a result, texts examine briefly (or ignore entirely) events and activists before and after the "King years." For example, some of the textbooks ignore or give only a cursory treatment to the role of Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, Anna Julia Cooper, E. Franklin Frazier, Ida B. Wells, Mary McLeod Bethune, Benjamin E. Mays, and A. Phillip Randolph in helping establish the fertile ground from which massive nonviolent direct action blossomed during the 1950s and 1960s.

These and other black leaders, along with numerous events during the first half of the 20th century, helped formulate the philosophical and theoretical foundations of arguments for black economics, civil and human rights, pan-Africanism, and other pertinent issues that were the linchpins of 1950s and 1960s mass social activism. An example of an event that predates the 1954/1955–1968 periodization and that is not mentioned in any of the texts is the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns of the 1930s. These campaigns were organized by blacks in Chicago, New York, and other cities in an effort to force white-owned businesses to hire black workers. Even prior to these campaigns, W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and others debated the concept of black economic cooperation and black consumer power as means of promoting civil rights for black Americans.³⁹

Even within the 1954/1955–1968 time frame, most of the texts portray SNCC, CORE, and individuals such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Robert Moses, and E. D. Nixon as supporting cast members for "King's Movement," if they discuss them at all. By downplaying the voices of many people involved in the movement, the textbooks make it appear as though King dominated the discourse until the emergence of militant groups during the mid- to late 1960s.

However, black women such as Ella Baker were critical of King's male chauvinism and his failure to advocate forcefully for female leadership in the movement. As one of the matriarchs of the movement, a founder of SNCC, and one-time executive director of SCLC (of which King was president), Baker earned her place in history as an important guiding force in the movement. However, she is minimally covered because the textbooks spotlight King as the focal point. The same can be said of Fannie Lou Hamer, Septima Clark, Jo Ann Robinson, and many other women who played critical roles in the movement.⁴⁰ This *maternal frame of reference*⁴¹ denies women's significance as primary initiators of the movement. The minimal coverage and maternal representation of women in leadership roles perpetuate stereotypical, biased, and inaccurate views of women in American history. Textbook writers need to respond to this problem by

integrating women into textbooks not as supporting cast members, but rather as primary leaders in order to provide a more accurate picture of women's participation in the movement.⁴²

From a practical standpoint, it is understandable that textbook writers have difficulty giving equal attention to all who participated in the black freedom struggle. However, textbook writers have an opportunity to distribute more balanced and comprehensive information about the movement. They also have a chance to show the roles that many people and events played in the overall realization of greater equality for African Americans during the decades before and after the so-called King years. In addition, if textbook publishers would reconceptualize the manner in which textbooks periodize information and present a more fluid history, students would see greater connections between the past, present, and future.

Vincent Harding discussed this problem of linearity in studying the black freedom struggle and suggested an alternative framework that highlights the contributions of many to the movement. Using the analogy of a river, Harding suggested that we view the struggle of black folk as a winding, tumultuous, and continuous river in which there are high tides and low tides. In this analogy, Harding sees all people involved in the struggle for equality as active contributors, with the low tides as precursors to the larger waves and vice versa, but with all the waves and the events recognized for their significance.⁴³

Textbooks could benefit from using such a perspective in presenting the civil rights movement and other eras of history.⁴⁴ Textbook writers and teachers might benefit from loosening rigid time periods to help their students see more clearly the connections between people and events over time and their significance to the present. Such connections tend to make history more interesting and relevant for students, who are better able to see the relationship between the civil rights movement and our present struggles for equality, democracy, and freedom.

KING AS A "MODERATE"

A third master narrative prevalent in history textbooks is that of King as a "moderate" spokesperson for African Americans. This theme is also dominant among contemporary scholars and the popular media, who label King as a conservative, a moderate, or an integrationist without presenting a broad picture of his ideas over time. Such labels downplay King's radicalism and have allowed King to be used for causes that do not reflect his progressive ideas. For instance, California conservative Ward Connerly has often offered ahistorical presentations of King as a "prophet" for a "color-blind" society in which affirmative action-type programs are evil and cause reverse discrimination, despite King's own words to the contrary.⁴⁵

The symbolism of moderation, as opposed to radicalism, is not new to American history and literature or to African American history. In the past, scholars have perpetuated this master narrative in portrayals of Frederick Douglass versus Alexander Crummell, W. E. B. Du Bois versus Booker T. Washington or Marcus Garvey, and even today with Jesse Jackson versus Colin Powell. Even during their lifetimes, the media portrayed King as a moderate in opposition to the radical Malcolm X.

During the early years of King's activism, *Time* magazine celebrated King's organizing abilities and his credentials as a thinker. The magazine portrayed King as a moderate voice in contrast to more radical calls to address the race problem in America.⁴⁶ In listing the social philosophers whom King studied in college, *Time* omitted the name of Karl Marx. The magazine also dealt with King's more "radical" positions as functions of his Christian belief in peace and love. *Time* eventually named King "Man of the Year" in 1964.⁴⁷ During the later years of King's life, however, major news magazines and other media criticized their "moderate icon's" opposition to the Vietnam War and his plans to lead a class-based coalition called the Poor People's Campaign to march on Washington, D.C., to demand a larger piece of the American economic pie.

The portrayal of King as a moderate is not without some historical validity. During the years of the movement, King and his advisors were aware of the need both to appear moderate at times and to distance King from the rhetoric of Malcolm X and other radicals. One of King's associates, Andrew Young, commented that he often played the role of the conservative protagonist whose job it was to balance the stances of King's more radical lieutenants, such as James Bevel and Hosea Williams.⁴⁸ This "balancing" tactic reflected King's moderate stance on many issues and his political strategy of appealing to a large cross-section of the American populace. At the same time, evidence that King was perceived as a radical can be found in his surveillance by government agencies. For instance, attorney general Robert Kennedy authorized the FBI to wiretap King's phones in the interest of national security, and King was hounded under the FBI's Counter Intelligence Program (CONINTELPRO).⁴⁹

Historian August Meier acknowledged King's radicalism and his attempt to place his message at the "center" of the body politic. Meier bestowed upon King the dialectical title of a "conservative militant." The duality of conservative and militant positions allowed King to appeal to a wider audience than his counterparts in the movement who polarized themselves on the extremes of ideas for change (i.e., the Black Panthers or the gradualists).⁵⁰ For the most part, the conservative militant duality translates to the type of moderation that King was able to portray in order to make the movement palatable to a wide cross-section of Americans. By barely mentioning or not acknowledging at all the U.S. government's surveillance of

King, textbooks portray a King who appears noncontroversial and conciliatory rather than the radical and controversial figure he was during his lifetime.

Textbooks reinforce the image of King as a moderate by providing excerpts from his speeches that either skim over or omit his critiques of American capitalism or his advocacy of a radical economic and political transformation of American society. Moreover, King's critiques of poverty and the Vietnam War and his support for a strong black economy are ignored or minimally discussed in nearly all the textbooks under examination. For instance, the textbooks make few references to King's harshest critiques of American society in his "I Have a Dream" and "Mountaintop" speeches.

The American Pageant, for example, quotes passages from "I Have a Dream" that evoke American idealism and patriotism and visions of the classic "melting pot" metaphor of a multiracial and multicultural society:

When the architects of our great republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.⁵¹

American Odyssey, *The Americans*, *The American Nation*, and *America: Pathways* also quote from the most popularized and uncritical parts of the speech. While *The American People* quotes the same well-known passages as the other texts, it offers the most critical perspective of the March on Washington by recounting the thoughts of civil rights activist Anne Moody:

Not all were moved. Anne Moody, who had come up from the activist work in Mississippi to attend the event, sat on the grass by the Lincoln Memorial as the speaker's words rang out. "Martin Luther King went on talking about his dream," she said. "I sat there thinking that . . . we never had time to sleep, much less dream."⁵²

By discussing Anne Moody's perspective, the authors of *The American People* attempt to balance their presentation of the "Dream" speech by showing that not everyone who heard the speech perceived it to be a messianic moment or the pinnacle of the civil rights movement.

Contemporary popular media and the textbooks examined have nearly solidified King and his words in time on that sweltering day in August over four decades ago. However, most of us do not read the words containing King's critique of American democracy, nor do we read his analogies of

African Americans still bound by the “chains” of American slavery. The master narrative of King’s “Dream,” as a moderate plea for the expansion of the American Dream, has overshadowed his more radical critique of poverty in the midst of substantial U.S. economic growth during the 1950s and 1960s and his insistence that America live up to the democratic principles it claimed to hold so dear.

In fact, the “Dream” speech that catapulted King to the national and international stage and solidified his image as the moderate spokesperson for the movement also contained passages that revealed a more radical King. Even the well-known passage from King’s “Dream” speech in which he tells his audience that “America has given the Negro people a bad check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds’” alludes to a shift in King’s message toward discussing issues of poverty and American capitalism as major reasons for the sustained oppressive conditions of blacks.⁵³ Unfortunately, high school students reading the most popular textbooks are rarely exposed to these aspects of that famous speech in which King stated,

But one hundred years later [after the Emancipation Proclamation] the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination; one hundred years later the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity; one hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land.⁵⁴

All the textbooks appear cautious in dealing with King and his increasing radicalism after the Selma campaign of 1965. Most, in fact, attempt to negotiate the issue by holding on to the moderate King, grasping for the more patriotic and messianic King of the early years, and showing the tension between King and a new generation of black radicals. *The American Pageant*, for instance, states, “The pious Christian moderation of Martin Luther King, Jr., came under heavy fire from this second wave of younger black leaders, who privately mocked the dignified Dr. King as ‘de lawd.’”⁵⁵

The American People distances King from the radicalism of the 1965–1968 era and ignores King’s more radical views during his final years. It states, “King still adhered to non-violence and interracial cooperation.”⁵⁶ Although King was becoming increasingly vocal in his criticism of American capitalism and the country’s gradualism toward eliminating poverty, *The American People* and most of the other texts defuse King’s radicalism during his later years by juxtaposing his moderate image with the more vocal cries for “Black Power” of the young radicals.⁵⁷

American Odyssey acknowledges King’s stand against the Vietnam War and even mentions King’s economic concern that the war was stifling the

Johnson administration's Great Society and War on Poverty. After briefly mentioning King and Vietnam, *American Odyssey* quotes from the "Mountaintop" speech in which King speculated about the future, the "difficult days ahead," and his people making it to the "promised land."⁵⁸ These quotes allude to the resiliency of black people in overcoming oppressive conditions, rather than offering a critique of the system that oppressed them. *The American Nation* and *The Americans* also overlook King's increased radicalism during his later years. All the texts focus on the moderate aspects of King's message in his "Mountaintop" speech.

Perhaps to avoid acknowledging King's increased radicalism later in life, most of the textbooks highlight King during the early years of his participation in the civil rights movement. The books focus on the cogency of his message of American ideals that could be embraced by all Americans, but few of them present King's scathing critiques of American capitalism. For instance, in a piece of rare video footage of King, recorded just weeks before his death in 1968, he offered an analysis of American capitalism that in tone is unlike anything portrayed in the textbooks:

At the very same time that America refused to give the Negro any land, through an act of Congress, our government was giving away millions of acres of land, in the west and the mid-west, which meant that it was willing to undergird its white peasants from Europe with an economic floor. But not only did they give the land, they built land-grant colleges with government money to teach them how to farm. Not only that, they provided county agents to further their expertise in farming. Not only that, they provided low interest rates in order that they could mechanize their farms. Not only that, many of these people are receiving millions of dollars in federal subsidies not to farm. And they are the very people telling the black man that he ought to lift himself up by his own bootstraps.⁵⁹

Such views on black poverty during King's later years are almost always skimmed over or ignored in the textbooks. In particular, none of the books mentions that while King abhorred the linguistic connotations of Black Power, he supported the Black Power advocates' concept of blacks pooling their economic resources to improve their conditions. He stated, "Black Power, in its broad and positive meaning, is a call to amass political and economic strength to achieve legitimate goals. No one can deny that the Negro is in dire need of this kind of legitimate power."⁶⁰

Another symbolic representation of King as a moderate is the juxtaposition of King's words and activities with those of Malcolm X. *The American Pageant*, for instance, provides the classic picture of Malcolm, with furled lips, pointing his finger toward his audience. The text of *The American*

Pageant helps readers further grasp this image of Malcolm: “Malcolm X trumpeted black separatism and inveighed against the ‘blue eyed white devils.’” In contrast, with regard to King’s death, *The American Pageant* states, “A martyr for justice, he [King] had bled and died against the peculiarly American thorn of race. The killing of King cruelly robbed the American people of one of the most inspirational leaders in their history.”⁶¹ No such praise is noted of Malcolm after his death. Instead, *The American Pageant* bluntly states, “in early 1965, he [Malcolm] was cut down by rival Nation of Islam gunmen while speaking to a large crowd in New York.”⁶²

While *The American Pageant* acknowledges Malcolm’s break with the Nation of Islam and observes that Malcolm began to “temper his separatist creed,” it holds strongly to the Martin/Malcolm dichotomy of the moderate versus the radical. Almost every text contrasts a moderate, magnetic, and inspirational King with an angry and militant Malcolm.⁶³ The power of these images of King and Malcolm help reinforce, for students reading these textbooks, the moderate master narrative of King and the prevailing dichotomy of these two men, which remains pervasive in popular culture and society.

American Odyssey follows suit in dichotomizing King and Malcolm. Under a section entitled “Malcolm X and Black Separatism,” the authors state, “Black separatism was the antithesis of the civil rights movement’s goal of racial integration.”⁶⁴ Like *The American Pageant*, *American Odyssey* features a picture of an angry Malcolm and acknowledges that Malcolm later “softened” his views, but it does not let go of the Malcolm/Martin dichotomy:

Though Malcolm X’s views on separatism gradually softened toward the end of his life, he never supported King’s nonviolent methods. Instead, he advocated the use of weapons for self-defense, believing that African Americans’ nonviolence simply emboldened violent white racists. Shortly before his death, Malcolm X pointed out in a speech at Selma, “The white people should thank Dr. King for holding black people in check.”⁶⁵

All the other texts take a similar view to that of *The American Pageant* and *American Odyssey*. *The American People* uses the same classic “angry” picture of Malcolm. *The American Nation* shows a photo of Malcolm X and the “radical” Muhammad Ali, who opposed American involvement in Vietnam and refused to join the military after being drafted. This picture is juxtaposed with King’s moderate and calming “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” *The American Nation* also quotes from some of Malcolm’s more vitriolic speeches, in which Malcolm advises blacks to “send him [a violent white man] to the cemetery,” in contrast to King’s moderate pacifist position.⁶⁶ Similarly, *America: Pathways* provides a picture of Malcolm talking with the “radical”

Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam.⁶⁷ Not surprisingly, none of the textbooks presents the now-classic picture of King and Malcolm shaking hands at the U.S. capital in 1964. This image, of course, would have weakened the King/Malcolm dichotomy.⁶⁸

By portraying King solely as a moderate, textbooks risk solidifying a presentist⁶⁹ framework that overlooks critical aspects of King and his ideas. For instance, during the 1960s, many southern politicians and FBI director J. Edgar Hoover did not view King as a moderate, but rather as a radical who had communist ties, or at the very least was influenced by communists. The FBI was so concerned about King's radicalism and potential for inciting a black revolution that it deemed his activities a threat to national security and subjected him to surveillance and wiretaps throughout the period of his involvement in the movement.⁷⁰ As can be seen in the FBI files on King, there was concern among some whites during the 1960s that while King may have been to the political right of other activists, his ideas and activities were radical and, according to many entities at the highest levels of government, potentially dangerous. This fact, along with the numerous threats that King received on his life and his eventual assassination, calls into question the moderate portrayals of King provided by most of these textbooks.

While King offered more radical critiques of black Americans' economic conditions during his later years, he also more explicitly connected American involvement in Vietnam and other countries with oppressive conditions of the poor in the United States, much like Du Bois and Malcolm X had done during the latter years of their lives. Only a few of the textbooks even briefly or peripherally discuss King's views on Vietnam or make reference to his ideas on American militarism and American poverty. In a speech in 1967, a week before King's famous "coming out" speech about the Vietnam War delivered at the Riverside Baptist Church in New York, he warned,

This confused war has played havoc with our domestic doctrines. Despite feeble protestations to the contrary, the promises of the Great Society have been shot down on the battlefield of Vietnam. The pursuit of this widened war has narrowed domestic welfare programs, making the poor, white and Negro, bear the heaviest burdens both at the front and at home.⁷¹

These textbooks' minimal or nonexistent coverage of King's anti-Vietnam stance, Poor People's Campaign, ideas about compensation for historically oppressed groups, and perspectives on black labor exploitation diminishes King's message and deprives students of the totality of the vision of a truly democratic, poverty-free, and peaceful society that King vigorously called

for during his later years. While textbooks cannot extensively cover all aspects of history, it is important for textbook writers and teachers to offer a more balanced history that includes information that may not fit nicely into predominant master narratives prevalent in textbooks. Incorporating more complex, complicated, and “radical” viewpoints into the teaching of American history makes history not only more interesting but also more accurate and pertinent. It also fosters ongoing critiques of important issues, such as poverty, capitalism, and war, that students would likely find relevant to contemporary issues facing the United States.

CONCLUSIONS: WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO?

Collectively, the three master narratives of King discussed in this article offer a sanitized, noncontroversial, oversimplified view of perhaps one of America’s most radical and controversial leaders. They hide King’s humanity, submerging his struggles and weaknesses and the depth of his ideas. They paint a picture of the civil rights movement as a period far removed from the present, disconnected from contemporary problems of racism, discrimination, and poverty in American society. As a result, students are denied an opportunity see King’s true message and its relevance to poverty, discrimination, and global conflict today.

When students are exposed to only the typical master narratives of King and other individuals, they are deprived of a conceptual lens that would help them better comprehend the world around them. Because textbooks remain the main source of historical information for most students, teachers must play a more significant role in moving beyond master narratives to provide their students with critical, relevant, and more accurate history. As a former high school history teacher, I have three recommendations as to how teachers may address the problem.

One recommendation is that teachers move away from textbooks as primary source material. Given many students’ ability to access the Internet in their schools and public libraries, teachers could assign lessons that offer counterviews to the master narratives in history textbooks. For instance, in studying the master narrative of King as a moderate, teachers could have students examine primary sources, such as government files on King, to see how the government viewed him as a radical. Such information can be found readily online.⁷² By exposing students to such primary sources, teachers encourage them to see the conflicting interpretations of King and allow them to construct their own interpretations. Such an approach also can easily be used with other well-known historical figures and events.

A second approach is for teachers to encourage students to make connections between figures and events of the past and those of the present.

For example, teachers might have students compare the political ideals of Franklin Roosevelt, who was considered a liberal Democrat, with George H. W. Bush, who is considered a conservative Republican. Of course, such a comparison presents some temporal limitations, but this project would force students to extend their thinking about the master narratives of Roosevelt and Bush by undertaking a dynamic and critical examination of these portrayals. Through such an exercise, students might find counter-information regarding some presidents' categorizations as liberal and conservative, and they may discover that such master narratives are rigid and limiting, whereas historical reality is much more fluid.

Finally, teachers could begin to address the problem of master narratives by integrating a bottom-up approach to history into their lessons. Top-down and Whiggish history approaches to history typically result in the "great men" master narratives found in many history textbooks. An alternative approach is to introduce students to historical events through the lives of ordinary or "everyday" people. For example, to obtain an understanding of what life was like for African American women during the civil rights period, students might be encouraged to interview women who lived through that period. This approach moves students beyond master narratives by allowing them to take active roles as historians instead of merely being the passive recipients of top-down interpretations.

Ultimately, we must remember that educating students about the history of their country has long been recognized as a vital aspect of preparing the next generation to participate in a democratic society. This commitment is grounded in the belief that a keen understanding of our collective past will provide students with insights into present challenges and dilemmas and help them avoid repeating past mistakes in our present and future. If we are truly determined to build a more democratic society that learns from the mistakes of its past, we must jettison prescribed textbook master narratives that prevent critical analyses and interpretations of our history. In doing so, we harness the power of history to help build a more democratic society.

Notes

1 I use the term *master narrative* to refer to a dominant and overarching theme or template that presents the literature, history, or culture of a society. For a discussion of the term as used within historical studies, see Jeffrey Cox and Shelton Stromquist (Eds.), *Contesting the Master Narrative: Essays in Social History* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998).

2 James Banks has argued that textbooks play a major role in presenting history to students, mainly because teachers tend to teach directly from their texts. As a result, textbooks influence tremendously students' views on American history. See James Banks, *Teaching Strategies for the Social Studies* (New York: Longman, 1990), 236–37.

3 James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 14–15.

4 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 722.

5 It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed account of how teachers might teach about King in American history. In another essay, however, I extend on this study of high school history textbooks and discuss specifically and in some detail how teachers might rethink teaching about King and the civil rights movement. In that essay, I also provide specific pedagogical examples of how to move beyond the master narratives found in many history textbooks. See Derrick P. Alridge, “Teaching Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement in High School History Courses: Rethinking Content and Pedagogy,” in *Freedom’s Bittersweet Song: Teaching the American Civil Rights Movement*, ed. J. B. Armstrong, S. H. Hult, H. B. Roberson, and R. Y. Williams, 3–17 (New York: Routledge, 2002).

6 *Ibid.*, 17.

7 David M. Kennedy et al., *The American Pageant* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002); Gary B. Nash, *American Odyssey: The 20th Century and Beyond* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2004); Andrew Cayton et al., *America: Pathways to the Present* (Needham, MA: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2005); Gerald A. Danzer et al., *The Americans* (Evanston, IL: McDougal Littell, 2005); Mark C. Carnes and John A. Garraty, *The American Nation: A History of the United States*, vols. 1 & 2 (New York: Longman, 2003); Gary B. Nash et al., *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2004).

8 See Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, 17.

9 See Thomas B. Fordham, <http://www.edexcellence.net/institute/publication/publication.cfm?id=329&pubsubid=1020>. It should be noted that my study examines the most recent widely used or popular textbooks.

10 For data from the American Textbook Council, see <http://www.historytextbooks.org/adoptions.htm>. For studies that cite *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society* as a popular textbook, see Van Gosse, “Consensus and Contradiction in the Textbook Treatments of the Sixties,” *The Journal of American History* (September, 1995), 668 and Sundiata Keita Chajua and Robert E. Weems, Jr. “Coming into Focus: The Treatment of African Americans in Post-Civil War United States History Texts,” *The Journal of American History* (March 1994), 1418. For information regarding *The American Nation*, See <http://www.ablongman.com/catalog/academic/product/1,4096,0321052870,00.html>. Loewen discusses the use of *The American Pageant* in high level and advanced placement high school courses, see Loewen, 17.

11 Van Gosse, “Consensus and Contradiction in Textbook Treatments of the Sixties,” *Journal of American History* 82 (1995): 658. As a point of clarification, note that Gosse’s study is an analysis of contemporary textbooks’ information about the sixties rather than an examination of sixties textbooks. His statement, quoted above, I argue, is therefore applicable to the contemporary textbooks examined in this study. A limitation of my study is perhaps the small sample of textbooks used for analysis. However, as mentioned earlier in the article, the purpose of my analysis is a critique of the representation of King and his ideas in six current textbooks in the United States rather than a full-blown examination of U.S. high school textbooks. My analysis of the six textbooks written by some of the country’s leading historians and textbook writers provides some important insights into how King is portrayed in many high school history textbooks. Moreover, a smaller sample allowed me to more critically explore imagery, metaphor, and symbolism that in a larger sample would have received only a surface analysis, given the space limitations imposed by a journal article.

12 The term *messiah* is derived from the Hebrew *massiah*, meaning anointed. In the tradition of the ancient Hebrews, it signified the belief in a future great deliverer—a priest, king, or prophet who would come with a special mission from God. Messianic language and imagery are especially prevalent among oppressed groups but also exist among oppressors who at one

time in their own history were the oppressed. Americans, many of whom belong to groups that were persecuted either long ago in Europe or more recently in this country, are especially receptive to messianic symbolism and imagery. See *The American Heritage College Dictionary*, Third edition; Wilson J. Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982), 2–16. See also Albert B. Cleage, Jr. *The Black Messiah* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968).

13 John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). Also see S. P. Fullwider, *The Mind and Mood of Black America: 20th Century Thought* (Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1969), 26–28.

14 The identification of a personal savior-messiah, prophet, or *Mahdi* is especially prevalent in African American politico-religious literature, as exemplified in such works as *David Walker's Appeal* (1829), Albert J. Cleage's *The Black Messiah* (1968), and W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Blacks often applied religious and messianic imagery to their situation, and many thought of themselves as "children of God" to be freed by a great deliverer. Nineteenth-century figures such as Nat Turner, John Brown, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Abraham Lincoln have historically represented the deliverers of the black race. In addition, some whites attributed messianic symbolism to the black condition during the antebellum and postbellum eras. Historian Wilson Moses pointed out, for instance, that white abolitionists attributed messianic qualities to both the Union armies and the black race.

15 For a thorough examination of King's use of language, see Keith D. Miller, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Its Sources* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 11–12.

16 *Ibid.*, 112–158.

17 For example, religious leaders and politicians such as John Winthrop, Cotton Mather, and Benjamin Rush; deists such as Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Paine; and 20th-century conservatives such as Ronald Reagan understood the power of merging Christian and patriotic symbols to energize and galvanize the masses. For an interesting discussion of King's use of religious and patriotic secular symbolism, see Charles P. Henry, "Delivering Daniel: The Dialectic of Ideology and Theology in the Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Journal of Black Studies* 17 (1987): 327–45.

18 Full titles and citations are as follows: David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986); Stephen Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: A Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper Perennial Edition, 1994); Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963–65* (New York: Simon and & Schuster, 1998), and *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965–1968* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006); and Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: The Free Press, 2000). For references to King as Moses and for a discussion of the impact of King's use of biblical narrative and preaching, see Richard Lischer, "The Word that Moves: The Preaching of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Theology Today* 46 (1989): 169–82.

19 See Bailey, Kennedy, and Cohen, *The American Pageant*, 894. Similar portrayals of a young messianic deliverer are found in Nash, *American Odyssey*, 676; Cayton et al., *America: Pathways*, 938; Danzer et al., *The Americans*, 911; and *The American Nation*, 795. *The American People* does not emphasize King's youth.

20 Danzer et al., *The Americans*, 911; Nash, *American Odyssey*; and Nash and Jeffrey, *The American People*, 921.

21 Nash, *American Odyssey*, 675.

22 Nash et al., *The American People*, 951 and Danzer et al., *The Americans*, 861.

23 Nash, *American Odyssey*, 685.

24 Cayton et al., *American Pathways*, 945.

25 See Kennedy et al., *The American Pageant*, 926; Nash et al., *The American People*, 974.

26 Nash, *American Odyssey*, 688.

27 Cayton et al., *American Pathways*, 953.

28 According to the Bible, Gethsemane was a garden where Jesus prayed and appealed to God about his destiny to die as a savior for humankind.

29 Danzer et al., *The Americans*, 927.

30 Nash, *American Odyssey*, 695.

31 Historian Howard Zinn has been a crusader for the presentation of history that is bottom-up rather than top-down. Top-down history is the history of “great men and women,” whereas bottom-up history is the history of the common people. See, for example, Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States, 1492–Present* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995). Historians James Davidson and Mark Lytle provide a good analysis of these historical viewpoints, using the terms *top-rail* and *bottom-rail* in discussing top-down and bottom-up historical approaches to writing history. See James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle, *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 177–211.

32 Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931; repr., New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951), v.

33 See Ivan Van Sertima, *They Came before Columbus* (New York: Random House, 1976).

34 See Peniel E. Joseph, “Waiting till the Midnight Hour: Reconceptualizing the Heroic Period of the Civil Rights Movement, 1954–1965,” *Souls* (Spring 2000): 6–17; Van Gosse, 658–69; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “Mobilizing Memory: Broadening Our View of the Civil-Rights Movement,” *The Chronicle Review: The Chronicle of Higher Education*, sec. 2, July 7, 2001. For a good discussion of the content and periodization of the civil rights movement and African American history in secondary history textbooks, see James Anderson, “Secondary School History Textbooks and the Treatment of Black History,” in *The State of Afro-American History: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Darlene Clarke Hine (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 253–74.

35 Bailey, Kennedy, and Cohen, *The American Pageant*, 891–95, 934.

36 Cayton et al., *America: Pathways*, 928.

37 Danzer et al., *The Americans*, 928.

38 See Garraty and Carnes, *Nation*, 789–805.

39 Robert E. Weems, Jr. “African-American Consumer Boycotts during the Civil Rights Era,” *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, 19, no. 1 (1995): 72–79.

40 For additional information about Ella Baker and other women activists in the movement, see Charles Payne, “Ella Baker and Models of Social Change,” *Signs: Journal of Women and Society* 14, no. 4 (1989): 885–99; LaVerne Gyant, “Passing the Torch: African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement,” in *The Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Jack E. Davis (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 130–44; Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); John White, “‘Nixon Was the One’: Edgar Daniel Nixon, the MIA and the Montgomery Bus Boycott,” in *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Brian Ward and Tony Badger (London: Macmillan, 1996), 45–63.

41 *Maternal frame of reference* refers to the tendency of males in the civil rights movement to relegate women to stereotypical roles as mother and child-bearer. In addition, some women involved in the CRM, for instance, have argued that male leaders did not allow them to take place in leadership roles, but rather relegated them to subsidiary roles. For discussion of this idea, see M. Bahati Kuumba, *Gender and Social Movements* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2000), 1–19.

42 Myra Sadker, David Sadker, and Lynette Long, “Gender and Educational Equality,” in *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives*, ed. James A. Banks and Cherry A. McGee Banks (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1993), 111–28. The authors in this essay pointed out that “studies show that bias free materials can have a positive influence and can encourage students at

various grade levels to change attitudes and behaviors as a result of their reading materials” (114).

43 Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1981), xviii–xix.

44 *Ibid.*, xi–xxvi.

45 See Paul Rockwell, “Ward Connerly Perverts the Teachings of Dr. King,” *The Daily Californian*, October 31, 1999. For a discussion of King’s views pertaining to affirmative action programs for African Americans, see Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967). Also see Mary Francis Berry, “Vindicating Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Road to a Color-Blind Society,” *Journal of Negro History* 81 (1996): 137–44.

46 See Lentz Richard Lentz, *Symbols, the News Magazines, and Martin Luther King* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 31.

47 *Ibid.*, 35.

48 Young states that King stated the following to him, “I depend on you to bring a certain kind of common sense to staff meetings . . . I need you to take as conservative a position as possible, then I can have plenty of room to come down in the middle wherever I want to.” See Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 285.

49 See Michael Friedly and David Gallen, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The FBI File* (New York: Carroll & Graff Publishers, 1993), 37–58.

50 August Meier, “On the Role of Martin Luther King,” in *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. David J. Garrow (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989), 52–59.

51 Bailey, Kennedy, and Cohen, *The American Pageant, The American Pageant*, 926.

52 Cayton et al., *America: Pathways*, 974.

53 Many historians use King’s “Dream” speech as an example of King’s appeal to the “moderate center” and identify his shift of ideas to the left as beginning after the march on Selma in 1965. However, James Farmer, founder of the Congress for Racial Equality, argued that the March on Washington marked the beginning of the end of the civil rights movement. While I am not willing to go that far, I do believe that the March on Washington was the beginning of a shift in King’s thought to an open discussion, on a national level, of black civil rights and issues of poverty. In fact, one can go back even further to some of King’s early speeches at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church to find these connections. For a discussion of Farmer’s position, see James Farmer, “The March on Washington: The Zenith of the Southern Movement,” in *New Directions in Civil Rights Studies*, ed. Armstead L. Robinson and Patricia Sullivan (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 30–37.

54 Nash et al., *The American People*, 217.

55 Bailey, Kennedy, and Cohen, *The American Pageant, The American Pageant*, 932.

56 Nash et al., *The American People*, 955–58.

57 *Ibid.*, 981.

58 Nash, *American Odyssey*, 695.

59 See *Frontline: The Two Nations of Black America*, prod. June Cross, 60 min., PBS video, 1998, videocassette.

60 Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here*, 36. Also see Derrick P. Alridge, “Teaching Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement,” 11.

61 See Bailey, Kennedy, and Cohen, *The American Pageant*, 932–934.

62 *Ibid.*

63 *Ibid.*

64 Nash, *American Odyssey*, 692.

65 *Ibid.*

66 Garraty and Carnes, *The American Nation*, 839.

67 Cayton et al., *America: Pathways*, 837.

68 See photo and discussion in Clayborne Carson, "A 'Common Solution': Martin and Malcolm's Gulf was Closing but the Debate Lives On," *Emerge*, February 1998, 44–53.

69 Presentism is the historian's error of making generalizations based on events taken out of historical context. For a discussion of this concept, see Derrick P. Alridge, "The Dilemmas, Challenges, and Duality of an African-American Educational Historian," *Educational Researcher* 32, no. 9 (December 2003): 25–34.

70 Michael Friedly and David Gallen, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The FBI File* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1993), 20–65.

71 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Casualties of the Vietnam War: An Address by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to the Nation Institute." Los Angeles, California, February 25, 1967. *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers*, King Center, Atlanta, Georgia.

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Critique of textbook representation of Martin Luther King Jr. as messiah, embodiment of the Civil Rights Movement, and a moderate. [Click to email this to a friend \(Opens in new window\)](#). [Click to share on Pinterest \(Opens in new window\)](#). [Click to share on Twitter \(Opens in new window\)](#).^Â Collectively, the three master narratives of King offer a sanitized, noncontroversial, oversimplified view of perhaps one of Americaâ€™s most radical and controversial leaders. They hide Kingâ€™s humanity, submerging his struggles and weaknesses and the depth of his ideas. They paint a picture of the civil rights movement as a period far removed from the present, disconnected from contemporary problems of racism, discrimination, and poverty in American society.